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A SUMMER VACATION IN COSTA RICA

Last March, when I had high hopes of going to Madrid to repeat the summer course for foreigners and to see some things in Spain which I had missed in the summer of 1914, I fortified my hopes by securing a passport early. Influenced by previous notices in *HISPANIA* about possible summer courses in Puerto Rico and Costa Rica, I asked to have those countries, as well as Cuba, included in my passport. As time went on the trip to Spain fell out of my plans. Then came news of no summer work in Puerto Rico and Costa Rica. But one day in May I suddenly heard of three young woman teachers from the University at Columbus, Ohio, who were going to Costa Rica for their vacation regardless of summer courses for foreigners, and I hastily invited myself to accompany them. They sailed from New York on the United Fruit Company S. S. *Tolosa*, while I joined them at the Canal Zone by taking the *Heredia* from New Orleans to Cristobal.

Mine was a delightful voyage of five days on the Gulf and the Caribbean. In the stop-over at Colon there was plenty of time to see the workings of the great canal, and even to get a ride through it if one were so inclined. One more night on the sea brought us to Port Limon, where we were not able to dock for several hours because of the heavy swell. When we did get ashore there was a special train ready to carry the passengers up to San José. But as we wished to take by daylight all of that wonderful ride through enchanting scenery from the tropical belt of the coast up to the region of perpetual spring on the continental divide we spent the night in Limon. We attended the concert that night rendered by the municipal band in the beautiful public park. Next morning we took the regular train for the seven-hour ride up to the tiny republic's capital and metropolis, San José, situated on a plateau nearly 4,000 feet above the sea level.

The next step was to get located in a private family, not a boarding-house; otherwise one does not really get into the Spanish atmosphere and the thought of the people. Getting into families was not difficult for us, nor for two other teachers, from New York, who came to San José later. The six of us were located in five different families of good standing, some of which had never before had a boarder. The trick of getting in is done by bringing a letter of introduction to some native resident, or being acquainted with some one who has been properly introduced to a native family. Living in a Costa Rican family is a pleasant experience. The people are most kindly and considerate; the food is good and abundant, though it requires tactful suggestion to get variety and sufficient vegetables. In the matter of diet the native mind seems to consider eggs, meat, rice, beans, potatoes, and plantains as "food," while fruits and vegetables are merely *refrescos*. After a time I hit on a scheme to get more *refrescos* and less of the unvaried food: I found that nothing so pleases the Costa Rican hostess as to have one eat generously, while failure to do so distresses her; so I ate sparingly of what I did not care for or had tired of, and liberally of what I wished. Consequently, during the latter part of my stay in the family I enjoyed at table many of the fruits and vegetables which always abound in the city markets.

In a private family opportunities for conversation are endless. My family

was composed of a mother, four grown daughters, and two excellent women servants, while every day brought numbers of visits from relatives and friends. Need I say that talking was the order of the day for seven days in the week? And such speed! I'll venture there is no woman under the sun who can wag her tongue faster than the Costa Rican. It was fine practice for my ears when all talked at once.

The schools of San José are in session throughout the summer (having their vacations in the winter—called *verano*), and visitors are heartily welcomed. I never saw people enjoy so much having visitors at school. There are numerous public schools, a *Colegio para Señoritas*, and the *Liceo* for the older boys. At Heredia, seven miles from San José, is the beautiful State Normal, which is neither equipped nor attended as it should be. To all these schools the foreigner may go as often as he likes; teachers and pupils frequently asked me, on the street and elsewhere, when I was coming again.

For one with an inclination to read there is the Biblioteca Nacional, open for certain hours both day and night, with a good assortment of books in several languages. I spent many hours there, and have my notebooks to show for them. Among the Spanish texts there is a fine variety of classic and modern writers of both Spain and Spanish America. I never saw such beautiful editions of the *Quijote*, huge in size with full-page illustrations; and there is a volume of Campoamor's *Doloras* that is a joy to behold. Of course that library can not compare with the famous one in Madrid, but it would reflect credit on a much larger nation than Costa Rica.

Then there is the Teatro Nacional, said to be excelled in magnificence only by those of Paris, Milan, and Buenos Aires. While I was there the Serrador-Mari Company of Havana put on a series of good shows, giving preference to recent comedies of Benavente and the Quinteros. They were quite worth seeing. It always seemed queer at the theatre to see the first floor occupied only by men, who rose by unanimous consent and filed out for refreshments between acts. We of the boxes went out, too, like the bear that went over the mountain to see what he could see. What we saw was worth seeing: in the beautiful corridor—I can't recall the proper name of it—the men were lined against the wall watching the girls in their pretty evening gowns promenade back and forth.

Movies? To suit every taste. Most of the films are from the United States, arranged in both English and Spanish, and the various theatres are always filled. The audience freely sympathizes with or disapproves of the scene before it. I remember that in "The Heart of Humanity" the villain was well hissed. The orchestra also comes in for notice from the audience.

The Museo Nacional contains a number of collections of interest to the tourist. Among them I enjoyed most the great variety of stuffed birds and the relics, chiefly pottery of various kinds, dug from old graves of Indians. Among the birds there was a beautiful specimen of the quetzal, which is native to the country, I believe. I was told how the bird builds and occupies its nest, always entering on one side and leaving on the other so as not to injure those beautiful tail feathers. In the observatory of this museum I saw how earthquakes are recorded by the seismograph.

At home I sometimes find it hard on Sunday morning to get to a Bible class at ten. But in San José eight o'clock often found me at the *misa de tropa*

in the Cathedral, where I arrived in time to station myself on an end seat by the central aisle in which was to stand the company of soldiers with their guns and bayonets. One Sunday I noticed that one of the soldiers, who was a mere boy like many others of them, pointed out to a companion that I had gold braid on my suit. Then he looked at me with a kindly smile, and I wondered if he had ambitions to rise from the freshly laundered plain cotton suit which he was wearing to a braided uniform.

Somewhere I still have the invitation, heavily bordered with black crepe, or something resembling crepe, which invited my family to the most elaborate funeral of the summer in San José. I attended it. There was a great deal of ceremony. A width of black velvet carpet ran from the state entrance of the Cathedral to the heavily draped black catafalque on which the casket rested during the service. There were numberless candles and flowers, tiny pages in high silk hats and long-tailed coats, priests in costly robes, and beautiful organ music and singing. As the *difunto* had been a member of congress, etc., etc., there were present at the funeral many of the diplomatic representatives of other nations. Altogether it was a solemn affair of state.

In the region about San José coffee is the chief source of wealth, thanks to the Spaniard who introduced the plant into the country from Havana in 1796. Two things I wished very much to see: a coffee plantation in bloom and one ready to be picked. I think even those wonderful blossoming almond orchards in California must be equalled by a *cafetal* when every bush—they are not trees—stretches out its leafy branches decked with white jasmines of delicate fragrance.

The coast region has its own sources of wealth, the chief among them being bananas. When I boarded the *Cartago* for my return to the United States and work, that good ship headed in the other direction in search of a cargo of bananas. We found them ready for us at Almirante, 30,000 bunches of them, packed in long lines of freight cars waiting to be transferred to the boat.

I never became reconciled to one characteristic—no, two—of Costa Rica. The first was the *zopilote*, a species of vulture, which rivals the poor in being always there. It's an ugly bird, without one graceful or pleasing feature. Perhaps that is the way a scavenger bird should be. At any rate, it gave me an uneasy feeling to look out and see a *zopilote*, or *zopliotes*, perched on a neighbor's roof, perhaps peering into his patio, looking for stray scraps of anything to eat. The other feature to which I could not become reconciled was a personal one, a very personal one—fleas. They were not at all offended by my aversion for them; on the contrary, they expressed especial fondness for me, all the time, everywhere. I almost never failed to pick up one or two on the way to the theatre, where I had to endure their capering and feasting during the entire performance.

Now, as I look back over my vacation in that land of perpetual spring, beautiful scenery on every hand, and comparatively cheap living—we paid 100 pesos a month for room and board, which, at the prevailing rate of exchange, varied from \$30 to \$34 in American money—San José seems to me the most desirable vacation ground, except Spain, for the American teacher of Spanish.

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